# Bandcamp, Our Silent Hero

## From its inception, 10 years ago, one exceptionally-crafted service has defined independent music distribution, and it's just become the smartest alternative for streaming.

*It’s just after 1PM on an especially beautiful Summer day in 2018, and you’ve decided with your two best friends that an impromptu hot dog barbecue in your little apartment’s parking lot would be a great way to spend the afternoon. You get on Facebook Messenger – no time to create an event – and begin to bother your group of art school friends. In a few hours, you’ve set up chairs in a circle around the borrowed fire pit, gathered meat tubes, marshmallows, and beer, and your guests have begun to arrive. The next step: retrieve your cordless Bluetooth speaker from inside to place it atop a log nearest the scene, re-pair it with your smartphone, and \_\_\_?*

The coolest, most rabid music-listeners I know almost all have Spotify memberships, joining [70 million others](https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/4/16850742/spotify-subscriber-count-70-million-users), globally as of January. For most, it’s how they prefer to swaddle their lives in an almost constant soundtrack – at work, in the car, at school, and at home. For many, it’s also how they discover new music outside of peer and social recommendations, and which reflects a substantial share of the music streaming market as a whole. Those folks I know who actually *create* music, however, are never seen using Spotify - even after they’ve endured untold horrors in order to publish their own music there - because the real story of its track record as a place to “discover” new artists, genres, or sounds is **completely abysmal**. In January, when 2017’s streaming data began coming in, a widely-shared 3000-word feature by [*Galaxie 500*](http://galaxie500.bandcamp.com/)*’s Damon Krukowski was run by the definitively terminal music magazine of broad notoriety - Pitchfork* - entitled “[How to Be a Responsible Music Fan in the Age of Streaming](https://pitchfork.com/features/oped/how-to-be-a-responsible-music-fan-in-the-age-of-streaming/),” which he began by citing some very alarming statistics.

“More than 99 percent of audio streaming is of the top 10 percent most-streamed tracks [on Spotify.] Which means less than 1 percent of streams account for *all other music*.”

Alarming to anyone who intends to create or consume any music separate the Top 40, anyway, which one would hope from the most Basic of Bitches. Last month, The Carters released an album on which [even Beyoncé](https://www.bustle.com/p/when-will-everything-is-love-be-on-spotify-beyonce-jay-z-fans-may-have-to-wait-to-stream-the-surprise-album-update-9426616) identified the problematic service by name. “Patiently waiting for my demise ‘cause my success can’t be quantified,” she rapped. “If I gave two fucks about streaming numbers woulda put *Lemonade* up on Spotify." The unfortunate issue with this single denouncement of the industry’s current direction is that its source is adamantly guaranteed a place for her work within Spotify’s top 10 percent for the rest of her career’s lifetime and probably far beyond.

[I could now take the time to note that she’s also entirely abandoned the city [she owes for her career’s creation](https://youtu.be/iiMlq8frlqw) in its darkest hour, but let’s leave that alone for another time, when we should also discuss how fucking terrible Drake also is to Houston (and women.)]

Unsurprisingly, the apathy is far from mutual. From the company’s perspective, the digits themselves should’ve been dearly and universally beloved from the beginning, and their exponentially ballooning hubris became so inflated by 2014 that they [launched a WordPress blog](https://insights.spotify.com/us/about-spotify-insights/) dedicated entirely to promoting and discussing their data called [*Spotify Insights*](https://insights.spotify.com/)*, proclaiming themselves - naturally - to be “the world’s favorite streaming service” and* [*championing*](https://insights.spotify.com/us/2017/11/02/listening-diversity-spotify/) *its progressive tech musk. Though Beyoncé is mentioned only twice upon a* [*search of its archive*](https://insights.spotify.com/us/?s=beyonce) *as it stands, it’s with relatively jumbo fanfare: “*[*10 Female Artists Women Listen To The Most on Spotify*](https://insights.spotify.com/us/2015/03/06/10-female-artists-women-listen-to-the-most/)*” declared her the third most popular female artist among women, globally, and “Single Ladies” the number one female-streamed track in the world (assuming I’m interpreting the language correctly.) And, ya know… her husband does* own a competing streaming service.

For many of my friends, SoundCloud maintained its relevance the more socially-focused platform for keeping up with work from their peers thanks in large part to its exclusive, timestamp-oriented comment function and it’s still the most convenient method of giving select friends or fans a first listen to unfinished or unreleased work via private links. By design, sharing is by far its biggest strength: their web player’s design was a huge deal when it was conceived, and it’s continued to be the smoothest, most diplomatic means of neatly embedding a track or playlist anywhere, though the space is now rapidly becoming more crowded with innovative Open Web offshoots like Vocaroo, Clyp, and Instaudio.

While I can casually throw these names around for you in the same sized font, the gulfs between the properties they denote are completely inexpressible in words. Because Spotify went public in Q1 of this year, they released [their first earnings report](https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20180502006667/en/) in April: 170 million active monthly users, $1.33 billion in total revenue, and $5.7-$6.2 billion in expected total revenue for 2018. I’ll spare you the entire *Forbes* piece it would require to comprehensively demonstrate just how cavernous of a disparity canyon the industry represents. Early projects like Pandora were docile, ad-free, and sincerely curious about the curatorial potential of music streaming services – *let’s use this cool new tech to play* ***music*** for ***anybody*** with a web browser if only because it’ll be a blast – yet in that sense, they’ve failed entirely.

Yes, of course I’ve had fun singing Sweet Home Alabama in the past with a beer on a boat on a sunny day in the Ozarks, but I’d be fucking bonkers if I was satisfied with how much I’m exposed to it in public settings. The amount of affection the American music listening audience has for the same 500 songs is on par with our rampant gun violence in terms of our unanimous tolerance for some ridiculously illogical habits. I’ve been sitting in a cute, moderately trendy coffee shop on the corner of the major avenue of access to my ­cute, moderately trendy Portland neighborhood for an hour now, and I’ve recognized every single one of the tracks played just a bit too loudly on the stereo and I’ve been sick of them all since Middle School. That one Bow Bow Chicka Chicka song… How very charming.

“*The 70s, the 80s… the one-hit wonder channel!”*

Contrary to the popular hipster narrative, it’s not the popularity of the lineup that makes the experience so distasteful but their regularity. I’ve been trying to think of something clever from history with which to compare this behavior, but looking forward seems like a better bet.

Imagine: It’s 2036 – four years after we found out we are not alone in the universe when a significantly more advanced civilization makes formal first contact with humanity by sending a party of diplomats, anthropologists, and explorers (who were actually getting ready to go in 2016 before getting word of the Trump presidency and deciding we weren’t quite ready just yet) who land their space egg right in front of the United Nations’ New York City headquarters and expressing something to the tune of *hey so um… we noticed you guys moved in and we just wanted to stop by and say hi*, entirely altering humanity’s self-perception and future trajectory (see: works by Gene Roddenberry) yadda yadda. The visitors expressed a wish to begin a cultural exchange project with us, and it’s just now coming to fruition… I have only moments ago made history in the eyes of the entire world when I walked through the front door of a Target store in suburban New Jersey leading a hovering hyper-intelligent silicon-based sphere of agender mist (roughly comparative to a basketball in size,) who’s already both impressing and shaming me tremendously as we move by the in-store Starbucks. From above us, Semisonic’s “Closing Time” is belched upon my life’s proudest moment and my guest requests we pause to discuss it, to my profound horror.

“The sound from the reproduction devices embedded above us...” the android translator trails off for a moment. “It is the same noise that was distantly reproduced 51 hours ago in ‘Miami’ as I conversed with Ambassador Phillip Defranco about ‘the setting sun’ on the ‘beach,’ coming from a small open air structure which he defined as ‘a surf shop,’ which was occupied by a young male who appeared to be moderately agitated, moving about in jagged strides as he wildly smacked the foundational surface with ‘a broom.’ The Ambassador explained the youth was likely nearing the end of his allotted period of daily occupational labor.”

Blood is flooding my cheeks as I listen with a building dread to the robot’s interpretation, awash with all manner of embarrassment for my species.

“Is the purpose of this noise reproduction of a logistical nature, or is it perhaps a common ritual within business and/or working class culture?”

Now it’s your turn to be the human representative in this pico science fiction: you’re now obligated to confirm the alien anthropologist’s hypothesis and explain that “Closing Time” is but one piece of recorded music among billions of diverse expressive works across millennia. You must reverently describe how the “universal language” of math within melodious composition has long been a hefty buzzword in the pop culture conversations about interstellar communication and our longtime search for extraterrestrial intelligence from the future-thrilled 90s - S.E.T.I.’s glory days – when we felt pretty damned good about space. The historic launch of the United Nations’ “greetings on behalf of the people of our planet” etched into [The Golden Record](https://www.npr.org/2017/09/30/554489944/the-voyager-golden-record-finally-finds-an-earthly-audience) aboard *Voyager I* and Jodie Foster’s novel portrayal of a S.E.T.I. scientist in the iconic Carl Sagan-sourced 1997 science fiction drama *Contact* are among the globally-celebrated Best Hits of humanism (not to mention the organization listed on your paystubs,) and they weigh a billion tons on you, now - in the most significant moment of your entire life, bar none – as you explain on behalf of your species to ***real*** extraterrestrial intelligence the reality of how negligent it is actually is of the culture the Record claimed to treasure. The worst part, though? The entire experience is accompanied by a nasal-as-hell Semisonic soundtrack.

Aren’t you *frustrated*? You should be, but it’s not over yet: inevitably, your round fictional companion of note is going to follow up their query with some seriously burning meat.

* “Just a half-generation ago, your utopian dream of a globally-connected world – in which everyone would be empowered to saturate and culture themselves with new ideas and forms of expression – was the defining aspiration of your society, and yet you’ve definitively achieved Total Connectivity, now, and caused the overwhelmingly opposite result: you’re all intolerable shitheads who every passing solar orbit become less and less capable of anything but regurgitation of the same foul bullshit. Y’all fucking wack. I’m out. ”

And there, that filthy little ball would have us all.

Friends, colleagues, human siblings of mine…

**It’s long-past time we expect better from ourselves** as music citizens of the world. Even the longest living of us are endowed with very little opportunity to absorb anything more than an infinitesimal fraction of all there is to experience, and we’ve all been carelessly and embarrassingly chucking it to the weeds. If it this all seems excessive, there’s no need to feel attacked, but for Pete’s sake… please stop claiming you “like music” because it’s misleadingly inaccurate and I’ll promise never to use the phrase “music citizens of the world” again, in exchange.

Tee ell; dee are: **you, your friends, and I are missing out on way too much cool shit** and we’re going to continue addressing possible causes and solutions to this ongoing catastrophe without asking for a single moved finger on your part because we are fucking saints.

The truth is, the stories that come to us that smell the strongest of philanthropy on the surface are often actually about some dusty, Y2K-lookin’-ass nerd with powerfully tedious grievances and too much time on their hands. The whole world knows the details by now of how Mark Zuckerberg’s horny social ineptitude led to Facebook’s conception, but we must both keep in check the bad habit we share – the whole reading world and I, that is – of dwelling entirely too much on the negative ones.

You missed it, didn’t you - the ten-year anniversary of Bandcamp’s launch? Ashamed, I realized last month that I did, too. Ashamed, because I owe a lot to to the platform’s unwavering commitment to the distribution and curation of work made by just about all of my favorite artists - within and outside of my social network.

“It's something I take for granted,” said my friend [yzome](https://twitter.com/yzome) – a [truly one-of-a-kind electronic producer](https://yzome.bandcamp.com/) who’s far-traveling composition is probably the closest Digital Audio Workstation equivalent of Extreme Use Testing - when automotive manufacturers effectively torture new prototypes in the most inhospitable conditions on Earth until they break. However, it’s not a PR stunt in yzome’s case - he’s just verygood at doing what he does after doing it for nearly 10 years - and his end product requires a hell of a lot more than any one genre would ever demand, but it more than delivers back plus interest on the investment.

When he stopped by *Drycast* in January 2015, we failed to achieve any descriptors much more sophisticated than “[alien sounds](http://bit.ly/drycast9).” Perhaps with an inner world of manic, often-arrhythmic which pose an unapologetic, yet magically lighthearted challenge to any cohesive theory. It’s very rare that his proudly-ungenreable exploration of the fringes does not demand the listener’s full attention, yet manages to be *impossibly inoffensive* like **nothing** else. (The term can’t make any sense until you actually listen.) While you’re at it, play *YVETTE* for any boomer you know with that classically impenetrable disgust for *all* electronic music and you’ll witness firsthand how special yzome’s particular innovation truly is. They’re not gonna jump for joy about it, no - it’s going to be alarming, and yet they’ll magically and inexplicably end up stick around for *Nobody* else I’ve ever heard across the (especially-wide) spectrum can go so loudly go so far, so fast without any insincerity, whatsoever. He’s I’d suggests ’d challenge you to find a more innovatively playing peekaboo in willy-nilly bursts that reveal his dynamic mastery of the dance music spectrum: through of breakcore, juke, footwork, techno sampling. After

* Like *thank god I don't have to look for a label to release this*. It's seen as a legitimate platform (by people who might actually care about what I’m doing, at least,) which I think is less offputting than uploading things to Mediafire or whatever else. It’s populist and boutique at the same time.

*Populist*, yet *boutique*. Nobody’s ever said it better. In fact, nobody’s said much at all in the mainstream press, but what I *have* found is 1) for the least likely audience to care about it and 2) *way* more insightful than you’d expect.

“Bandcamp has an independent-artist identity because of practicalities: Independent artists from web-centered subcultures need it most,” observed an especially savvy online aside from by [Ben Ratliff](http://benratliff.net/) - jazz and pop critic for *The New York Times -* asking “[Is Bandcamp the Holy Grail of Online Record Stores](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/20/arts/music/bandcamp-shopping-for-music.html)?”